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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SAN SALVADOR 000418

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10 YEARS

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [KCRM](#) [ES](#) [GANGS](#)

SUBJECT: VIOLENCE SPIRALS IN EL SALVADOR/GOVERNMENT GRASPS FOR SOLUTIONS

Classified By: DCM Michael Butler for reasons 1.4 b & d

1. (C) Summary and Comment: In 2005, El Salvador eclipsed Colombia as the country with the highest homicide rate per capita in the Western Hemisphere. The GOES has responded to the epidemic of gang violence with a variety of initiatives that have thus far failed to stem the tide of violence. The latest initiative, announced February 13, is the creation of a special operations unit within the police to identify and capture extortionists, mostly "mara" members, who are killing large numbers of public transportation workers. Separately, according to GOES law enforcement, the deportation of criminal gang members from the United States to El Salvador continues to add to the burgeoning violent crime problem. Although the police is earnestly (and desperately) trying to respond to a public safety crisis, the Salvadoran government lacks the additional resources necessary to adequately address the problem. A further impediment is an underfunded and less-than-effective Attorney General's office and judicial officials who are often unwilling to keep violent criminals behind bars. End Summary and Comment.

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EL SALVADOR'S "CRIMINAL EPIDEMIC"  
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2. (U) On February 13, the Salvadoran National Chief Medical Examiner presented his annual report, and characterized El Salvador as plagued by a "criminal epidemic" that has created the highest rate of homicides per capita in the Western Hemisphere. In 2005, 55.5 of every 100,000 inhabitants in El Salvador lost their lives to violence (3,812 total). This rate of violence eclipsed that of Colombia, which reported 40.4 murders per 100,000 inhabitants over the same period. The Pan American Health Organization PAHO) considers any figure above 10 murders per 100,000 inhabitants to be of epidemic proportions. The high level of murders in El Salvador is largely attributable to criminal gang activity, and has its roots in control of territory for drug trafficking and sales, and extortion of common citizens, public transport workers, and small businessmen. The Medical Examiner further provided annual violent crime statistics which show that El Salvador's murder rate has spiraled year-by-year, starting in 2002 with 2,346, then 2,933 in 2004, and culminating with the 2005 figures. For the first time in 2005, even the upper class "Escalon" neighborhood in San Salvador appeared among the high murder areas, with 13 homicides. (Note: "Escalon" is one of the bedroom areas for the diplomatic community. End Note.)

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THE GOES IS TRYING, BUT FAILING  
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3. (C) The GOES has responded to the epidemic of gang violence with a variety of initiatives that have thus far failed to stem the tide of violence. Over the past several years, the police have created a number of targeted units, including specialized anti-gang and homicide units. On February 13, the Minister of Governance announced the formation of a special operations unit in the police to identify and target extortionists, largely "mara" members, who have been responsible for numerous assassinations of public transportation employees unwilling to pay "mara" "tolls." Unfortunately, the formation of these units does not place additional police officers on the street, but rather rearranges officers already assigned to different tasks. To provide additional manpower and security, ESAF soldiers now augment some police foot patrols. This arrangement, however, is only a temporary fix in a country wary of granting police powers to the military.

4. (C) The most significant and promising action taken by the GOES to address gang violence is the January, 2006 appointment of Rodrigo Avila as Police Director. Avila is an ARENA party stalwart with broad political and business contacts, and has been a close Embassy contact for many years. He previously served as Police Director in the 1990s, and most recently held the post of Vice Minister of Public Security. By naming Avila Police Director, President Saca sent a clear message that he is willing to employ his best and brightest to address the gang violence issue. Avila's first actions included the removal and prosecution of a large number of community police officers who had been receiving

protection money from "mara" members and other petty drug dealers to allow the retail drug trade in several notorious San Salvador neighborhoods. Last week, Avila also transferred a large number of traffic officers who were suspected of asking for bribes in exchange for forgiving traffic tickets. However, despite his abilities and commitment to cleaning up the streets, Avila's chance for success will be significantly hampered without additional police resources.

15. (C) Much of the gang violence in El Salvador occurs in areas without a strong police presence. El Salvador has 16,000 police officers to provide public security and criminal investigations for seven million inhabitants. This police-to-civilian ratio of 1 to 437 is less than half that of major U.S. metropolitan cities with comparable populations. Further compounding the lack of police officers is the fact that gangs are not concentrated in one area of the country. They operate in all major cities and in the rural areas of each department. The police will not be able to adequately provide public security in gang infested areas without a substantial augmentation of its forces.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) Although it is focused on the issue, the GOES is presently unable to adequately address gang related violence. The expedited deportation of criminal gang members from the United States to El Salvador under the Secure Borders Initiative (SBI) is only exacerbating the problem. Costs associated with gang violence -- including unemployment -- are already estimated at eleven percent of El Salvador's gross domestic product. In the absence of any mechanism to absorb and monitor these deported criminals, we should expect gang violence and unemployment to escalate. Both factors contribute to increased illegal immigration to the United States.

17. (C) President Sacca and all his key players on this issue fully understand that, next to promoting economic growth and investment, this is El Salvador's critical issue. Nonetheless, Sacca can only devote a very limited amount of resources to the criminal justice system within the context of other demands such as the need to maintain fiscal responsibility and to expand social programs such as public health and education. Having said that, the GOES has taken great advantage of USG programs targeted to law enforcement, such as INL-funded counternarcotics programs. GOES law enforcement is also excited about ILEA and how those programs will improve the effectiveness of their criminal justice professionals. Post experience has been that U.S. funding of criminal justice programs here is money well-spent and can have a positive impact on U.S. national security, especially in regards to the "mara" issue in the states.  
Barclay